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On Yonder Mountain

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"ON YONDER MOUNTAIN"

by

CHRISTOPHER WALTER

Under the Direction of Craig Dongoski

ABSTRACT

The road to becoming an artist is paved with much confusion as we try to mold our brains into understanding abstract concepts and ideas. I became fascinated with how people perceive art, in particular, southern males that have no previous knowledge of art history or desire to learn. I contemplated long and hard about this and asked myself the question, "What if they did want to understand art?" The only difference between my brethren and I is this desire to pursue this seemingly foreign world. By creating an imaginary world and culture based on my own southern upbringing I have created a series of figurative paintings exploring various contemporary art themes in an effort to clarify my own understanding of the two worlds I am closest to and how they may or may not be related.

INDEX WORDS: Southern, Art, Surrealism, Pop-Surrealism, Realism, Transcendentalism, Modernism, Post modernism, Abstract expressionism, Post minimalism, Relational aesthetics, Land art, Masculinity

"ON YONDER MOUNTAIN"

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CHRISTOPHER WALTER

A Thesis/Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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"ON YONDER MOUNTAIN"

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DEDICATION

This body of work is dedicated to the memory of my father Douglas David Walter, who has, and always will be a constant source of inspiration in my life. Thanks for helping me through my life.

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I would like to thank my wife Ursula Faye Walter for having patience with me while I completed this body of work. I would also like to thank my Mother, Susan Walter, and my brothers David and Matthew Walter who have also helped inspire this work along with June-Bug, Catfish, T-Bone, and the entire inhabitants of Lamar County Georgia.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The reasons I had for coming to graduate school were fairly selfish. I was working a corporate job as a computer animator and finding little satisfaction making corporate art. It seemed hollow to me, devoid of any meaning or concept other than profit. I thought I felt this way because I was not directing the projects myself. There is a hierarchy to creative control in industry, but as I moved to the top of that hierarchy I found the feeling didn't go away. I missed the safety net of academia, where I was free to create anything I wanted, and had the peer group to help form it. In my spare time I took up painting as a creative outlet. I had never painted prior to this except for a few experiences with gouache in my foundations classes of my undergraduate studies. After the handful of classes I had using traditional media I was pretty much forced to make art exclusively on a computer screen. I had always admired painting from afar as a digital artist but had never had the opportunity to give it any time. I soon realized that if I wanted to master the medium I would have to devote more time than an hour or two every night. I looked to graduate school as a way to incubate my skills as a painter and as a way to rehabilitate the hollowness I felt toward creating art.

I am in a unique position as a southern male being in such close proximity to the art world. Often times I find that my upbringing is direct contrast to the profession I have chosen. I believe this is because of the stigma placed on being an aloof artist that probably has its roots in Modernism. It is an unfortunate but true fact that many outsiders do not hold stock in people who have devoted their life to playing with paint. This has always bothered me but I have never understood why. In order to justify my actions I often compare them to my background and enviably feel uneasy when I know my life is based on ideas that are completely subjective. Then I came to the conclusion that all of this comparing and contrasting would make for an interesting body of work with the added benefit of helping me understand the world I'm from and the world I am in currently. Through a series of paintings based on the

perceptions of my Father and his friends towards contemporary art I have removed myself from the equation allowing for more clarity and understanding of the two world I am the most familiar with.

2 “ON YONDER MOUNTAIN”

There is a great deal of mental gymnastics that must go on to even try to understand what is going on with certain forms of contemporary art. When I first started school I was rather amazed at the complexity of thought in contemporary art, especially those where the visual aesthetics of a piece is secondary to the actual concept, e.g. the concept art of Sol Lewitt (Fig 1), Minimalism, Post-Minimalism, and Relational Aesthetics. My undergraduate education did not involve much contemporary art history so on entering graduate school I found this type of art the hardest to appreciate. In some respects I felt like an outsider in my own field so I decided early on not to dismiss this type of work but to really try and understand it for its intellectual value.

The small town southern conservative principals that shaped my life to this point came into direct conflict with the new, more liberal information I was receiving. I try not to look at this as an advantage or disadvantage but as a path towards understanding. The fact of the matter is that my entire life has existed in the south so it is the only culture I have to compare others to. I may have never been involved in the arts if it wasn't due to an early fascination of computer art and animation which led me to pursue my undergraduate degree in the same discipline. It was only because I attended an art school that I became exposed to other types of art from painting and drawing to performance. If my life would have never taken this direction then I would probably be just as naive to contemporary themes as any other common stereotype of a southerner.

Dwelling extensively on this concept gave me the inspiration and formula for my exhibition. I thought about the people in my life who were the most removed from the art world as it could come, my father and his friends. Sure they could recognize the popular highlights of Renaissance art or the

Impressionistic paintings that adorn every doctor's office in the county, but aside from that, Thomas Kinkaid, and a handful of others there wasn't much more. They certainly didn't know anything of contemporary artists, and that seemed unfortunate, especially the more I came to see the academic validity of the fine arts. I set forth to try and explain what I was studying in graduate school to them, all the different types of bizarre art I was learning about, and was met with empty stares and awkwardness. Whatever I would do the conversation would inevitably end up back debating which car tire was better or who had a harder life than the other.

This approach of unsolicited education did not work in part because they were not interested and in part because it had nothing to do with their world. Everything about art was so foreign to them that it seemed pointless to make an effort. They were fine how they were and trying to understand Serano's *Piss Christ* was not something they would ever appreciate (Fig 2). This type of artwork was in direct conflict to all of their deeply ingrained beliefs. Fortunately for me I had not yet calcified to this level. My direction then changed. If they didn't care, what if I just pretended they did? I have a pretty good imagination so I could probably emulate this type of world in my mind. What would happen in a world where this really mattered? Where they were tasked as I was in understanding contemporary art. It was in this spark of genius that found my formula for my graduate body of work.

I was struggling to understand these contemporary and complex ideas myself. I needed to really understand why someone would put Jesus in a jar of urine and think it was beautiful but that was difficult. I knew I would never feel comfortable calling myself an artist if I couldn't understand art. Then I found if I removed myself from the equation I was much more free to put aside my personal apprehensions. If I used a fictitious version my father and his friends as surrogates of myself I was able to explore multiple viewpoints of my upbringing in comparison to my studies. This would perhaps create multiple conclusions and be a quicker path toward clarity. I would simulate them acting out and experimenting with the same art forms that I was trying to understand and contemplate their perceptions. This approach would

also allow me to question what it really means to be a contemporary artist in the south and perhaps how I can add to the history of painting with my own work.

I chose to title this exhibition of my work, “On Yonder Mountain” because the bulk of my outdoor experiences as a child took place on a hill that was a few miles from my house. My father and his friends would always refer to this hill as “The Mountain”...even though it was just a hill. In the presupposed world that I have created “The Mountain” is the main stage for all of my characters experimentation. I used the word “yonder” because it is southern slang for a short distance away, as “The Yonder Mountain” was from my house.

2.1 EVOLUTION OF WORK

The evolution of my work has been varied throughout my graduate studies. When I first entered the program I found myself dealing with the ambiguity that is obtaining ones MFA. Any direction that I received from faculty seemed to send me in an opposite direction from another. I became very frustrated and had to remind myself that I was here to paint. At the time I was riding the train to and from school and became fascinated at the complexity of Kudzu (an invasive species of vine that has taken over much of the south). I thought that it would be a challenge to paint the Kudzu and since I couldn't make sense of much else at that point I began obsessively painting small panels of Kudzu with a very small brush. Through this I realized that it was important for me to limit myself if I ever wanted consistent content. The Kudzu pieces were actually the first consistent body I have ever produced (Fig 3). I then made the decision to expand my parameters to a regionalist view and paint only content from the South, specifically middle/south Georgia. This seemed fitting since this was the part of the world I was most familiar with and I learned early on to go with what I knew.

At the end of my first year I grew rather tired of painting and found myself going back to the computer more and more. I found it was much faster to make up scenes of the south from just taking pictures off the Internet then trying to remember them out of my head. In the same fashion as a collage

artist I would go out and find a background, characters, and other objects and arrange them to my liking. I did this very quickly and it was more satisfying than my struggling paintings. I also found I got a good response from my peers so I continued along this route of taking random scenes from the south and superimposing historic looking characters and iconic imagery together in an interesting composition. There really wasn't much more thought than that and when I was asked why I choose to incorporate the images I did I could only defend them from an aesthetic standpoint, conceptually they were in their infancy.

I found access to a large format printer and began to print my compositions on canvas. I believe the simple fact of printing on canvas seemed to take the work out of the computer and validate it in my mind as fine art. That did not last long and I become jealous that a machine could make something on canvas better than I could paint something on canvas. I was using the computer in the same fashion as I always had been. I was letting it make my work for me, not using it as a tool, but as a crutch. At the same time I read Walter Benjamin's, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" and really started thinking about what I was doing by using machines to make my work for me. Benjamin's article is rather lengthy and a lot of it doesn't apply directly to my studio practice, but one thing that did resonate was his argument that mechanical reproductions were missing something, an aura of authorship that could only come from a human (Benjamin 1936). This seemed to resolve the problems I was having. I knew there was something missing to my work but I hadn't been able to put my finger on it. I didn't like my work because a machine made it, not me.

I knew that it would be impossible, and ridiculous to throw the computer out of my workflow completely. I had spent the majority of my life learning how to use it to just throw it away would have been a waste. I decided I would now use it in the mindset that it was only a tool but definitely not a crutch. The first thing I tried to do was print on canvas and then use that print as an underpainting to later go over with acrylic. This was an awful failure as I soon learned that it was pointless to paint over a

realistic image as one just ends up abstracting it to an unrecognizable form in order to bring it back to being realistic again. This was a waste of time.

My next idea was to use the computer to print out basic shapes and already abstracted objects so I could go back in and put in the detail with actual paint. This also turned out to not work to my liking. I was using the computer to print colors that I had matched specifically to my palette but I could never get them spot on. My paint mixing skills were not where they needed to be and everything was coming out looking worse with paint on it than it did when it came out of the printer. I was not in a good place.

When summer came and my first year of graduate school was complete I finally had time to think about what I had been doing. I came to the conclusion that I really wasn't any further along than when I started. I produced work, but it wasn't what I had set out to do. I had three actual paintings, a handful of digital prints, and a pile of absolutely awful un-stretched canvas with hundreds of dollars of wasted paint piled on top of them. I used the summer as an excuse to step back and really think hard about what I wanted to do with my remaining time.

I came to school to primarily learn how to paint. Once again I started painting, this time in oil, in an attempt to become a master painter by the end of the semester. This also proved a futile attempt. Once I was painting in oil I longed for the quick drying capabilities of acrylic and quickly went back to it. I knew that I only had time to become the master of one technique so I vowed to never go back to oil, as it would permanently derail any chance of becoming a good painter by the end of graduate school.

I began printing out the portraits of random figures and landscapes I had previously used for my digital collage and would use them as reference for my acrylic paintings. I finally began to make headway in my skills as a painter and this seemed to resolve some of my conflicts with using the computer since it was still in the picture. At the same time multiple members of the faculty suggested that I should really be focusing on my digital prints. They liked them and thought they made more sense than

my current direction, even though I couldn't understand why. I found myself at odds again so I started doing both.

After forcing myself to make both paintings and collages I started to realize another missing link in my work. There was no story that tied anything together. It was harder and harder to make meaningful compositions because there wasn't any sort of formula in which to create them consistently. Since my earlier work in animation had always been based on a narrative I decided to approach my work from a narrative standpoint, and give myself characters and situations. This was the end of my third semester of school and a real turning point for my work. At the same time I was working out these technical problems I was having a very hard time at the academic level understanding some forms of contemporary art. I was tasked with listening to John Cage and reading about Paul McCarthy and I really couldn't make heads or tails of anything anymore. This solidified my decision to use my father and his friends as surrogates of myself as a means to understand this work. I would use them as characters and imagine what they would do if they were in my situation. I would paint this and then I could combine both my quest for technical mastery and academic understanding into one practice.

My fourth semester through the rest of my time in school's direction stemmed from this one idea. I came up with five different characters each representing my father and his friends and one for myself. Then I picked one art themed idea I wanted them to contemplate and the compositions pretty much started to make themselves.

2.2 DISCOVERY POINTS

There have been a host of discovery points along this journey of becoming a painter. Three years later I feel like I am only beginning. There are two camps of discoveries that I have made, one being based on technical ability and materials, and the other on the academic understanding toward assimilation of contemporary art.

Technically speaking I have had the opportunity to experiment with nearly every form of liquid media available in hopes of finding the one that suits me the best. Out of acrylic, oil, gouache, water-color, and other combinations involving epoxy-based resin the one that works the best for me is acrylic. This is because I have a tendency to rest my hand on my work area when I do areas of fine detail and because acrylic dries so quickly I mitigate the risk of smudging my painting. The quick drying properties are also the closest physical medium to digital paint, which allows me to use some of the same techniques on both the computer and the real world.

There has been considerable debate over the difference between oil paintings and acrylic paintings. Some say that it is impossible to create the same sort of glazing effects that allow for oil paintings to glow. This may be true but to see the glow one has to see the painting in real life. I decided this didn't matter for me because most people would probably see my work the same way I have seen all the great works in the world, on a computer screen. Of course this is rather contradictory given my efforts to get away from the computer and mechanical reproduction. When I take this into consideration along with Walter Benjamin's idea of aura I find that the idea of a painting having an aura is just as absurd as any other half-baked meta-narrative.

Taking all this in consideration it has taken me a long time to figure out why I am fascinated with the idea of making physical paintings as opposed to digital work. My conclusion is that the lack of physicality involved in creating work on a computer is my main annoyance. I enjoy the freedom of painting on a large surface and being able to touch it, and walk away from it and when it's finished display it along with my other paintings to better inform my work. I imagine if I had the means to do this with digital tools I would probably just as soon go that route, although that type of technology does not yet exist.

Upon entering graduate school I did not have a firm grasp on understanding contemporary art. I knew most of the movements but I could not tell you why any of them took place. It really seemed like

after post-impressionism everything logical fell apart. I spent a good bit of time studying Modernism and post-modernism to figure out where my work fit into this picture. The modernist standpoint doesn't work for me because I am not interested in experimenting with reduction or materiality. I am more or less a post-modernist because I see the futility in the human condition but at the same time I don't want to sit around and do nothing. I embrace the absurdity of the human condition because of its dark hilarity. When I found the post-modernistic absurdist principals I related immediately because they believe the same thing. Either we embrace the absurdity of the fact that humans are around for no reason at all or we kill ourselves. The previous seems to be a less painful decision. This was the first time during my studies that I actually felt like I truly understood a concept.

My upbringing took place in the Post-Modernist period. The south is kind of stuck in a weird time warp that includes pockets of backwards antebellum ideals right next door to Modernist desegregated schools. I attended a well to do church that still sang rebel battle hymns on occasion. This provided things to work through as a child. I believe it was in encountering all of these contradictions in logic on a daily basis that led me to my Post-Modernist beliefs. Nothing really makes sense when I really think about it, yet we're still here.

After really thinking about Post-Modernism I decided that since everything has really been done I am rather free to do anything I want. I find this to be one of the liberating forces of making art in this time period. I could weave baskets or paint sunsets; there is no real rejection anymore. This has allowed me to just go ahead and make up my own world with it's own set of rules and meta-narratives since according to Lyotard's article, "The Postmodern Condition", I don't have a choice in the matter in the first place (Lyotard 1979). In my world I encompass the entire southern world, which allows me to paint anything I want as long as it is tied to the south without having to worry about it not making sense.

According to Jean Baudrillard we now live in a world where all of history is crammed together in one time period (Baudrillard 1998, 166-184). Because of the Internet we can have knowledge from all

points in time and watch historical events in a non-linear fashion. I am not sure if I think this is a good or bad fact but in my art I try to illustrate this by appropriating imagery from many different times in history. I find that all this non-linear information has created a certain type of uneasy awkwardness. When I create an image with someone from the 18th century wearing modern overalls I feel like I am able to express this awkwardness. There are many similarities between the process of creating art with materials from the Internet and cooking in a kitchen with a spice rack filled to infinity. One can throw anything in the pot they want but what happens if the spice is two hundred years old? It tastes kind of awkward.

The first painting I made was based on the Greek myth of Sisyphus (Fig 4). I found that Sisyphus was a character that had been appearing in a lot of my readings of Modernism and Post-Modernism and was a good metaphor for many absurdist principals. I considered how my father would resolve Sisyphus and how he would explain it to me if I were he. Since Sisyphus' job in life was to roll a rock up a hill only to push it off a cliff and have to roll it back up for eternity I came up with a southern version of an infinite loop of futility. I placed the character of my father and one of his friends in a field with an old steam tractor and figured they were out there debating whether or not to get the old thing started again. Then to make an infinite loop I painted some split firewood in the scene because I rationalized they wanted hook a wood chopping extension to the steam tractor in order to chop wood to use to power the stream tractor. Perhaps this didn't make sense at all but in the creation of this painting I came to understand the modernistic absurdist principals behind Sisyphus and was finally starting to gain forward momentum in my understanding of other art based on these ideas.

When I was emulating my father and his friends' conversations I would type out what I thought they were thinking next to the Photoshop sketches I was using to construct the compositions. The text was intended to bridge the gap in my mind from animation to painting. The only way to really have dialogue in a painting is with text. Most of the time this text had nothing to do with what was going on in

the scene, which I used as a clever way to confuse my audience and make them want to look deeper into the work. I was reading a lot about John Baldessari and really enjoyed his humorous approach to text in his early paintings (Fig 5). They made sense to me but at the same time they made no sense at all. Why would anyone want to paint text about painting? How absurd. I enjoyed Baldessari's take on contemporary art and admired his storytelling abilities. I choose to display text next to also capitalize on this model. This also complemented my ideas of absurdism because it was another level of indirection. The only way that one could figure out the work is if they read the title that is based on whichever art form I was experimenting with at the time.

At this point it became apparent that I needed to ground the narrative in some linear fashion so it would make sense to me when I was creating the work. I had to have a reason why my characters were ever to be interested in art to begin with to make it seem less like make-believe and more like a hypothetical situation. Found object art and appropriation seemed like a logical place to start, as I barely understood why anyone would want to make art with trash or steal content from another. This is where my southern sensibilities really started to create friction. Appropriation was totally against anything I had ever been taught about plagiarism and directly challenged all I knew from my corporate life about copyright rules and regulation. Found object art was no different; it was using trash to make art. How could trash make art? If I was finding this hard to understand, what would my father think of it? How would he explain to me that appropriation and recycling was a valid academic concept?

The answer is he would have done what anyone does to find out about the unknown. He would have researched it. My father and his friends had a habit of rooting through dumpsters to find things of interest so I imagined that one day they were doing that and got a hold of an art history book (Fig 6). Having nothing else to do they would then decide to figure out what art was all about. If an art history book told them that it was all right to make art out of trash then that was enough validity for them. It seemed like a rather simple validation but when I contrast that with absurdity it makes sense.

After doing some research I realized that this could have actually happened. There were a couple of Atlanta based artists that sought out the old cotton mills in my hometown for cheap studio space in the 1980's and 90's. By assuming that one day one of these artists threw away an art history book I was able to ground my world in a sort of loose logic that allowed for the characters to figure out why someone would choose to be an artist.

The limits I put on myself for making the pieces were that whatever the art form I chose to explore, it had to be logical that my father and his group of friends would somehow be interested in it. Transcendentalism was the perfect idea for a second painting (Fig 7). Since transcendentalism deals primarily with going back to nature to find enlightenment it worked out well, as most of these experiments, and most of my father's life took place outdoors. To find out what it meant to experience the raw transcendental power of nature I placed my characters in the middle of a field with a seasonal hurricane coming upon them. They then decide to build a special enclosure to make sure they didn't get swept away. They chose a calf pen for this and covered it in dirt and held it to the ground with rope. This also deals with the masculine identity of the men. My father was somewhat obsessed with the weather, in particular hurricanes. Often times during large storms that produced hurricane warnings I could find my father standing outside taking in the fury of nature. Probably the most ferocious of all storms would be a hurricane so that is why I put this in the composition.

The fourth painting in the series is based on Felix Gonzalez-Torres (Fig 8). During my studies of contemporary art I found relational aesthetics to be one of the hardest concepts to grasp. Studying the way Felix Gonzalez-Torres expected people to interact with his work really helped me grasp this idea, the fact that he used ready-made objects like candy also connected the concepts of appropriation with the earlier Dada movement I was coming to appreciate. Torres would put a large pile of candy into the corner of a room and leave it there. It was his expectation that someone would come up and take a piece of candy. The action of the person interacting with the art was the art itself. Unfortunately no-

body would take the candy and interact with the work because it was in a gallery and they just assumed it was sculptural work. I find a great deal of humor in this failed experiment of art and wanted my characters to relive this (Fig 9).

At first I thought about putting actual candy in the gallery but I decided it wasn't worth it. Painting the scene was enough since, like Torres' work, nobody was going to touch it anyway. I had to pick something relative so I chose butterscotch candy that I remembered hating as a child, and my father's favorite candy, Miller High Life.

The Felix Gonzalez-Torres piece is the only in the series that takes place indoors. To keep theme of my characters always being outside I opted to paint their portraits in the room where the candy was instead of putting the entire character in there. The fact of the matter is most of these guys would never step foot in a gallery so their relational distance to the art is them interacting with it by not interacting with it outside.

The fifth painting references my understanding of Modernism and materiality. It is based on the work of Jackson Pollock and the other abstract expressionists of that time (Fig 10). The scene depicts two characters standing in a field with multiple paint buckets and a large wooden Boy Scout control tower looming over a large white canvas. The characters are discussing the quality of knots on the control tower and expressing their disdain that their children don't know how to tie knots. This is a reference to my childhood as I was forced to learn how to tie knots and build control towers by the time I was ten years old. I envision the characters climbing up this tower and to really understand the materiality of paint, in the same manner as Jackson Pollock using a stick to drip paint, they do it in a manly way with entire tree (Fig 11).

The sixth painting is based on both relational aesthetics and Fluxus Art (Fig 12). During my seminar classes we approached Fluxus art and sound poetry and I found them particularly hard to understand. In particular the work of John Cage did not sit well with my naïve understanding of contempo-

rary art. It seemed like a good idea to these combine my feelings of Fluxus with relational aesthetics, which I was still mulling over when this painting was realized. In this painting three characters are standing in the woods debating whether or not to run cable to an old television set so they can watch hunting shows while they are hunting. This seemed like a form of Relational Aesthetics that would actually be a success for my characters. The television set in the painting is a nod to Fluxus art, as it the television is outdated; my characters have come to believe the Avant-Garde/Fluxus movement it is outdated as well.

The seventh and final painting of the series is devoted to the land art of Robert Smithson and Donald Judd. While studying both of these artists I found it very frustrating to find logic in why they were making work in the middle of nowhere. Then as I came to understand it I realized the nature of site-specific artwork. The longer I thought about it, these two artists make it possible to call any dirt pile or random piece of junk in a field site-specific art work.

My first idea for this painting was to create a landscape that had been destroyed by tractors. Reading Robert Smithson's writings on *Spiral Jetty* (Fig 13) he mentions a fascination with the red colored dirt around the areas of the salt lake when he was scouting out a location for the project. This immediately rang a bell for me because Georgia is notorious for having staining red clay. Unfortunately I was never able to envision what type of work these characters would make with large machinery and red clay so this painting died in the studio.

Donald Judd's work was a little bit easier to envision in my make-believe world. His cube-like sculptures in the middle of the desert are hauntingly beautiful and have a familiar awkwardness (Fig 14). I enjoy thinking about what people must think when they stumble upon this in the middle of nowhere. One really has to question what kind of logic went in to this. That is the art for me in all of it. I titled this painting, *Donald Judd-zu* (Fig 15). The painting itself consists of a simple field with two characters seated to the side with a Judd reminiscent structure covered in kudzu towering over the scene. Before

this time I had not placed any kudzu in a composition with my characters so I felt it was necessary to do this to bring the entire body of work together.

The fields of central Georgia are decorated with the remains of chimneys from old share cropping shacks that used to stand in the fields. Many of them have been covered over by kudzu vines in the same way that I covered the Donald Judd piece. I did this intentionally as another nod to the southern landscape.

2.3 INTENT

It has always been important for me to create work for a broad audience. I feel like a lot of art is rather hard to understand without previous knowledge. For instance, there aren't many people that could explain why John Baldessari painted text on his earlier paintings and appreciate this without taking a class or reading an excerpt about it. Even reading an excerpt may not give someone enough information to truly understand it's academic merits. Work that is made primarily for concept, with secondary regard toward visual aesthetics is a difficult idea to appreciate for the amateur viewer. If it doesn't look good, how could it be art? I could not even begin to count how many times I have heard, "I could do that. How could that be art?"

I do not want my art to invoke this sort of response. Rather, I would like to make it easily approachable to anyone of any knowledge base. I do this by spending a large amount of man-hours on my work, which is fairly obvious. I have observed that people without a prior knowledge base of art are able to appreciate this. I look at it like a trap to draw them in and then help them contemplate the deeper meaning through my titles and narrative accompaniment of my work. Another device I use for this is humor and satire, which can be found not only in the content of the paintings but also in the narrative accompaniments, which I write in first person from the main character in my stories.

The target audiences for my work are people who have been in a similar situation to my own in feeling alienated by art. When I add humor to my work the lightheartedness can disarm any apprehensions one may have toward trying to find a reason to appreciate it. I want people to know that art does not have to be something that must be seriously contemplated if they do not feel like they want to go that far. I believe if enough people felt comfortable around art then we may not have some of the problems with public support of the arts that we do know in this country. It is my goal to change some of these notions in an effort increase awareness of the arts.

I like to picture a person standing in front of some piece of abstract expressionism and scratching their head. They could stand there all day wondering what the work was about and may never come to any conclusion. This makes people feel stupid and it doesn't have to be that way. Especially if the artist didn't really know what the work about when he was making it in the first place. That sort of approach to understanding and creation does more hurt and good, even if it is quite hilarious to watch happen.

2.4 INFLUENCES

The influences in this body of work are as varied as the subject matter. All of the scenes in "On Yonder Mountain" are about a cotemporary art movement, artist, or some other academic movement throughout history. This being the case it pretty much opens my influences to be anything and everything, particularly the things that I do not understand as I use this work as an excuse to figure them out.

I have a lot of influences from a technical painting standpoint. Formally I am very drawn to the work of the Italian Renaissance and Baroque Periods. I find the attention to detail to be fascinating. Andrea Mantegna is one of my favorite examples of a painter that pays attention to detail, in particular his *St. Sebastian* (Fig 16), Mantegna made sure that everything he put in his paintings were accurate for

the scene they were found in. If his scene took place in Italy he would make sure that all the plants were native and the rocks were the same found there. Because I am painting scenes that take place in the south I also use local flora and fauna. I also find that this gives the audience an extra sense of satisfaction if they are inclined to notice.

The mood I attempt to convey in my work is directly influenced by the later transcendental paintings of Caspar David Friedrich. Friedrich was a master of atmosphere, which is apparent in all of his paintings but probably most clear in *Abbey in Oakwood* (Fig 17) where he depicts the somber mood of monks going to the ruins of an abbey to bury one of their own. The openness of the sky and the looming atmosphere of the clouds is something I try to convey in my work. I find it creates a sense of dark loneliness that invokes memories of southern gothic writers such as Flannery O'Connor.

O'Connor and other southern gothic writers are extremely important in the way that I portray the south. Where the south is a beautiful place it does have a dark history. I think it is important to include this in my work or at least keep it in mind when I am creating. Southern Gothic literature also involves a level of grotesque humor that I find complements themes such as absurdism.

Pop surrealism was probably my first entry point into modern painting. I became fascinated with the bizarre worlds Mark Ryden created in his "Meat Show" when I stared at the blank walls of my cubicle in my life as a corporate artist (Fig 18). Ryden's work is similar in attention to detail as Mantegna's but has a type of cartoon realism that also appeals to my animation and story telling side. His color palette is also similar to that of the Italian masters, which gives it a historic feel that I try to emulate.

Josh Keyes is an artist that I also admire from the attention to detail standpoint. He paints realistic scenes of nature and makes sure to render each and every blade of grass, leaf, and even hair on animals (Fig 19). It is my experience that people respond well to work that looks like it took a great deal of time even if that was not the case. From Keyes I have adopted his labor intensive and painstaking attention to grass and leaves. Keyes also paints with acrylic in a manner that is barely discernable from oil paint.

Observing this allowed me the confidence to continue on painting with acrylic when my skills were in their infancy.

The idea of telling stories in paintings is nothing new but the work of Donald Roller Wilson is exceptionally unique. Wilson is known for painting monkeys and dogs wearing human outfits but he is also known for his extremely long painting titles (Fig 20). In Wilson's process he writes down his ideas first and then lets the paintings come from that text. The paintings are really an afterthought to the importance of his narrative. I have borrowed this workflow from Wilson and I find that it helps organize my abstract ideas into one of much more clarity, allowing for a more formed painting.

Don Hertzfeld is an animator that I have admired from the first time I saw his short, *Billy's Balloon* (Fig 21). Hertzfeld makes his animations entirely without the use of a computer which is both hard to believe and seemingly impossible in today's society. His earlier work is laden with dark humor that may not be appropriate for all audiences, which I tend to find quite hilarious. Hertzfeld finds a way of subtly pushing people's buttons, which I am also prone to doing with my work, adding humor as a nice way of cushioning the blow.

The list of artists that have touched and formed my work during my studies could read on for pages and pages. These were just the top choices that have really had the greatest pull for this body of work. From a technical position I admire anyone that is able to pick up a brush and paint, from abstract expressionists to photo realists, which is something I don't think I could have said when I entered the program.

3 CONCLUSION

The journey I set out on with this degree led to many questions. Unfortunately I do not believe that I have found many answers. Formally I am amazed at how much my skills have progressed in painting. It is my hope that I can add something to the rich history of painting through my unique viewpoint.

I have been successful in understanding both of the worlds I am closest too and yet farthest away from by comparing them both side by side.

When I look at this experience from a deeper standpoint and ask myself if I feel any different? I find it rather hard to answer that question. I started off being confused with the art world and peoples perceptions of art and I am still confused. Where this used to bother me I find it quite comforting now, as I know I have an endless source of inspiration and the technical skill to be able to create new work to help me deal with this confusion. I had preconceived that there would be a point that I would just “get” it but I now have learned that may not be possible. I may not ever get it and from what I have learned from contemplating Post-Modernism, that is perfectly acceptable.

24. *Straight Blue/Broken Blue*
25. *Not-straight Yellow/Not-straight Yellow*
26. *Not-straight Yellow/Not-straight Red*
27. *Not-straight Yellow/Not-straight Blue*
28. *Not-straight Yellow/Broken Yellow*
29. *Not-straight Yellow/Broken Red*
30. *Not-straight Yellow/Broken Blue*
31. *Not-straight Red/Not-straight Red*
32. *Not-straight Red/Not-straight Blue*
33. *Not-straight Red/Broken Yellow*
34. *Not-straight Red/Broken Red*
35. *Not-straight Red/Broken Blue*
36. *Not-straight Blue/Not-straight Blue*
37. *Not-straight Blue/Broken Yellow*
38. *Not-straight Blue/Broken Red*
39. *Not-straight Blue/Broken Blue*
40. *Broken Yellow/Broken Yellow*
41. *Broken Yellow/Broken Red*
42. *Broken Yellow/Broken Blue*
43. *Broken Red/Broken Red*
44. *Broken Red/Broken Blue*
45. *Broken Blue/Broken Blue*

Figure 1, Sol Lewitt, *Color Grids: Table of Contents*, Print, 1975



Figure 2, Andre' Serrano, *Piss Christ*, Photograph, 1987



Figure 3, *Big Kudzu*, Acrylic on Panel, 2010



Figure 4, *The Myth of Sissy-Fuss*, Acrylic on Canvas, 2011

WHAT IS PAINTING

DO YOU SENSE HOW ALL THE PARTS OF A GOOD
PICTURE ARE INVOLVED WITH EACH OTHER, NOT
JUST PLACED SIDE BY SIDE? ART IS A CREATION
FOR THE EYE AND CAN ONLY BE HINTED AT WITH
WORDS.

Figure 5, John Baldessari, *What is Painting?*, Polymer paint on canvas, 1966-68



Figure 6, *Appropriation and Found Object Art (Dumpster Diving)*, Acrylic on Panel, 2012



Figure 7, *Transcendentalism*, Acrylic on Canvas, 2011



Figure 8, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (USA Today)*, Candies, individually wrapped in red, silver, and blue cellophane (endless supply) , 1990



Figure 9, *Southern Gonzalez-Torres*, Acrylic on Panel, 2012



Figure 10, Jackson Pollock, *Untitled*, Dripped ink and enamel on paper, 1948-49



Figure 11, *Abstract Expressionism*, Acrylic on Panel, 2012



Figure 12, *Relational Aesthetics*, Acrylic on Panel, 2012



Figure 13, Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*, Rocks, Earth, Algae, Salt, 1970



Figure 14, Donald Judd, *Untitled (for Leo Castelli)*, Concrete, 1977



Figure 15, *Donald Judd-zu*, Acrylic on Panel, 2012



Figure 16, Andrea Mantegna, *Saint Sebastian*, Oil on poplar wood, 1457-59



Figure 17, Casper David Friedrich, *Abbey in Oakwood*, Oil on canvas, 1809-10



Figure 18, Mark Ryden, *The Debutant*, Oil on Canvas , 1998



Figure 19, Josh Keyes, *The Call 1*, Acrylic on Canvas, 2008



Figure 20, Donald Roller Wilson, *Mrs. Jenkins Had Turned Her Old Pink Bedroom into a Dining Room for Her Dog, Patricia*, Oil on canvas, 1986



Figure 21, Don Hertzfeld, *Billy's Balloon*, Animation, 1998

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